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Youth: "We are pledging each other before the dead.
We shall not be worthy of offspring."

If later during the same festival either one of the pair wished to break the betrothal, they addressed each other in verse, saying:

"We promise each other in rhyme.
Now let us speak verse again.
May evil not come upon us,
Or upon our descendants."

Such verses are called "hta thi kwaw." Unless an engagement thus made was broken off the same night, the young man was under obligation to send a mediator to arrange for the wedding within a short time. If he failed to keep his pledge, his strength to resist an evil charm ("so"), would lapse, and he would go, it was thought, into a decline.

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Many of these practices still obtain among the Karen in the outlying hill-country; and in choosing a bride no step would be taken without divination by the customary method of inspecting the chicken bones, except in the case of the betrothals effected by the young people themselves at the funeral-feasts. It sometimes happens that a young man, seeing a maiden who attracts him, mentions the circumstance to his parents, who approve his choice and send a mediator to her parents with an offer of marriage. As the services of a confidant are required sooner or later in nearly all cases, the omens are consulted and must prove favorable before he proceeds on his mission.[1] If on his way he should chance on anything that is inauspicious, such as the gliding of a snake across his path, the barking of a deer, or the report of a death, he will return home. Otherwise, he continues his journey to the house of the young woman's parents. The conversation that takes place there is carried on in verse characterized by figures of speech which suggest, but do not state explicitly, the purpose for which the mediator came. On entering the house, he sighs, perhaps, and remarks that he is in a trying position. The parents inquire what the matter is, and he answers with a couplet:

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"Give me a white pullet,
And I shall feel better."

[1] See Chapter XXVII, pp. 288, ff.

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The parents apprehend that he is asking for their daughter. If not ready to give her in marriage, they may answer:

"This white pullet we have but raised;
Never once has she cackled."

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The Parents of the Bridegroom
Bowl for the youth who do wedding here, that are they Burmese betrothals a gift day of
wedding procession to the wedding account of the bride

The hint is sufficient, and the mediator promptly makes his adieu in plainer speech:

"You have not received me. Do not revile me.
The youth's parents will keep their son.

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You did not consent, but you spoke kindly.
As for me, I am not discouraged."

In case, however, the parents are favorably inclined, but are in doubt as to who the young man may be, knowing that their caller has a son of his own, they ask him:

"Do you come on your own legs,
Or on those of another?"

He replies:

"On the legs of another."

Or they may be uncertain as to whether he intends his offer of marriage for their maiden daughter or the older one, an eligible young widow. So they ask him:

"Are you crossing a flat bridge or a round one?"

The expression "flat bridge" refers to the young widow, the other to the maiden. A "round bridge" is a log, for in the jungle a bridge is commonly nothing more than a log. A flat bridge is one made of planks. The significance of the two expressions as applied by the parents is obscure to me, but is subject to several interpretations. If there should be two unmarried daughters in the family, both eligible, the parents would inquire:

"Have you come for a basket of rice
Or only for a mortarful?"

The basket, being the larger receptacle refers to the older and, presumably, larger maiden.[3]

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During his first call the mediator does not expect to progress far in his negotiations. If he has been favorably received, the family may kill a chicken and invite him to eat with them. He departs without knowing what the outcome will be, and the parents find an early opportunity to get the consent of their unmarried daughter to become a married woman ("mŭ pgha").

On his second visit a few days later the intermediary may find the father sitting at the front of the house and probably overhears him call out to the mother at one of her tasks within: "Here comes that male buffalo. Shall we tether him or let him go?" If she shouts back: "We might as well tether him," he knows that his proposal will be accepted. Even should she reply to the contrary, the caller would enter the house and pay his visit, but would make

[3] The Karens often use the word "larger" in referring to an older child.